DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 972 EA 006 895

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TITLE The Principal in the Socio-Political System of the School.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (60th, Washington, D.C., March 31-April 3, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Elementary Secondary Education; Models; Perception; Policy; *Political Issues; *Political Power; *Principals; *School Community Relationship; Status

ABSTRACT

This paper is one of six presented at a symposium on the integration of policy, power, perception, and status into a working model. The objectives of the symposium were to define the concept of policy and its interrelationship to power; provide a framework in which policy is affected by perceptions and demonstrate how status roles and perceptions alter the nature of policy; and provide a basis for administrators and researchers to integrate the previously vague and unintegrated concepts of policy, power, perception, and status into a model. In this paper Carter discusses the relationship that has developed between education and politics and notes that it is clear that political activity is one way to increase school resources and, therefore, improve the instructional program. The school principal, if he possesses certain qualities in his personality, his attitudes, and his abilities, can use his influence to fashion needed coalitions in order to acquire the needed resources and achieve the adoption of the values and programs that he believes can better the school's educational program. (Author/EA)

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THE PRINCIPAL IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE SCHOOL

by

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Historically, education has been enshrouded in an apolitical atmosphere. This has contributed to the mythical dichotomy between education and politics. Propagation of the myth has largely been due to what Schor and Usdan[1] refer to as the historical misinterpretations which have clouded the vision of educators so that may are not cognizant of the political behavior they exhibit, nor the political behavior of their colleagues. These misinterpretations have included the notion that education should be protected from the grasp of political machines and that professional expertise in itself removes educators from the realm of politics. Third, is the failure of educators to distinguish politics from partisanship.

The aforementioned misconceptions have not always been without some justification;[2] however, due to the narrow interpretation traditionally given politics eductors should be cautious in accepting such a limited perspective.

Prepared for the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D. C., 1975. (Rough Draft)

EA 006 895

Recently, educators have come to accept and support a more realistic view of politics. This is typified in the statement by Nunnery and Kimbrough:

> . . . rather than argue for the independence of the public schools from politics, educators should use their energies to see that the schools are subject to the democratic political process. That the schools belong to the people is a deep tradition in American education. This tradition should be strengthened by perceiving schools as political agencies rather than endeavoring to create agencies completely withdrawn from the society or run by a few at the top of some monocratic bureaucracy.[3]

Eliot[4] makes the point that this is not new because superintendents and school board members have always been political in certain aspects of their behavior. Frequently, they have chosen to refer to this politicalism as community and/or public relations. However, upon careful examination one can readily see the existence of politics threaded through all levels of education.

In the last decade Bailey[5], Iannaconne and Lutz[6], and other scholars in the field of education have begun to focus their attention on the politics of education at the national, state and local levels. However, within their discussion of politics, little attention has been given to the political behavior of the building principal. [Today our schools are set in a climate permeated by criticism of the educational system and societal unrest, an unrest particularly found in our schools] which makes it even more necessary for the principalship to be viewed politically. Irrespective of the conceptual position of the school in relation to the educational process, the individual school finds itself in the center of community attention. As administrator of a school, the principal is faced with the challenge of addressing many issues and

making decisions which have not been traditionally seen as falling within the realm of educational administration.

The principalship, when viewed as a political and pivotal position, is responsible for initiation and facilitation of many supportive kinds of educational endeavors. Such endeavors can be fostered and developed in communities which previously did not have the opportunity to participate in such activities. Consequently, we need educators who, through their expertise, are able to influence (political) decisions concerning the schools.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the political activity and influence of the principal in intra-school departments or personnel as well as the external agencies and resources located in the school community.

Rationale for the Political Activity of the Principal

Why would the principal be involved in political activity when there are so many others who are perceived as having influence in a school system? The reasons are as follows:

(1) The principal is in a strategic position to influence the decision and actions of those who come in contact with the school.

(2) The principal is responsible for educational leadership.

(3) The principal has a legitimate base of authority, influence, and power.

(4) The principal is more closely involved with the instructional program than any other administrator in the organizational hierarchy.

The principal, by the very nature of his position, is exposed to various individuals and community organizations who are interested in

education, and it is imperative for him to establish lines of communication with the total school community. The community in which a school is located can prove to be an invaluable resource to the school and the school system.

In urban settings the public school principal is in a very precarious position, but so are his rural and suburban counterparts. Although the roles and responsibilities of the administrative process in all of these settings may be similar, the political behavior required of the principal may be vastly different (This point will be expanded upon later in the paper). While the rural administrator usually has only one basic constituency, the residents of the geographical area due to his relative position to the superintendent,* the urban, and in some instances suburban administrator, has many different visible groups and pressures with which to contend. Further, he must provide educational services at the same time.

Given the social strata and complexities of our large metropolitan communities, the urban school principal* has to assimilate multiple inputs, process modes, and output demands from the political, economic, social, and cultural environments internal and external to the school in which he works. These pressures invariably affect the responsibilities of the principalship, such as roles, relationships, and operational functions.

Within this same framework, but on a more demanding basis, are the needs of the school's pupils and the resource requirements of instructional and support staff. These immediate needs must be met on an even higher priority basis than those of the community in general. Given

that this is the case, it is the principal to which this responsibility is designated in an operational context. What is solely attributable to the principalship is the grassroots administrative accountability within the educational system. Therefore, it is the principal who carries the responsibility for implementing the educational mission of the school district. It is within this framework and political setting that the contemporary urban principal must provide leadership and guidance.

Political Coercion, Coalitions, and Conflict: A Definition

Hartman[7] defines politics as "the exercise of power, influence, and authority and the making of authoritative decisions about the allocation of values and resources." Dahl[8] states that "a political system is any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority. Bailey[9] argues that politics, as the fashioning of coalitions of influence, is an attempt to determine what values will be authoritatively implemented by government.

Admittedly, these definitions are broad, and it is hard to see how a principal could not be involved in some facet of this political activity. For purposes of this paper, politics will be defined as that which "involves both the promotion of one's interest and the use of whatever resources are available to protect those interests."[10] Therefore, a principal is involved in politics each time an effort is made to obtain support for, appease the demands of, or communicate with an individual, group, or organization. The definition used in this paper says nothing about motives. It is the writer's opinion that striving to improve the instructional program of the school does not, and should

not, imply that the principal seeks to rule or coerce those with whom he comes in contact.

Nunnery and Kimbrough[11] state that since major educational issues are not solved in isolation from politics, the educational quality of a community will suffer if the educational leaders of the community fail to influence the decisions that are made. A principal should possess certain knowledge about the kinds of decisions that should be made so that he can serve the best interests of the school and the community.

In any treatment of the principal as a politician, one needs to identify the processors of political power and develop a strategy for dealing with the constantly changing political picture. Obviously, one of the realities of our time is that the function of the principal has changed. Among the many factors fostering this change are the increased competition for a sufficient share of the tax dollar and community pressure. Indeed, such competition and pressure can render the principal's traditional role of educational leadership ineffective, unless he is able to exert some influence. Thus, it is clear that the way to obtain aid for the schools and to improve the instructional program is political. Urban centers need principals who can give beneficial input into the kinds of changes needed in our schools and principals who are willing to gather support for those changes. Not only does the improvement of the quality of our schools depend upon the influences of school administrators, but the improvement of our society also depends upon their influence; the quality of our society is contingent upon the quality of our schools.

Being political is predominantly a matter of interaction. The successful principal needs to have an abiding faith in the worth of each

member in the school community and then strive to develop an atmosphere in which each person maintains a wholesome attitude toward the school.

Another important characteristic of the political behavior of the principal is his belief that the failure of any individual in the school or community to make a contribution is largely due to his ineffectiveness as a leader. "People are apt to live up to what others expect of them" has been said many times, but it is a truism that has passed the test of time. People grow in an atmosphere in which they are accepted as worthwhile people, who have positive contributions to make. Usually the principal can build greater confidence and progress in a program by working with the community on ideas initiated by them than he can by trying to rally them around to his way of doing things. He possesses certain qualities in his personality, his attitudes, and his abilities, and he can use his influence to fashion needed coalitions in order to achieve resources and the adoption of values and programs which he believes can better the educational program of the school. This enables him to have the influence necessary to release the full potential of the resources of the school and community. He exerts no "power over" the group, but strives to create a "power with" style of leadership that results in group planning and teamwork. His leadership is really crowned with success when it can be said by all concerned that he so inspires those he influences by word and deed that all members in the community reach the maximum of their abilities. This calls for an unwavering equality of treatment, a willingness to listen sympathetically.

To function politically has never been presented as the easy, all's well interpretation of coordination.

The principal's political behavior should be closely related to the goals and objectives of the school. Sound goals serve to focus and guide the activities of the principal in a direction away from the narrow concept of politics.

Another factor which contributes to the principal's political success is the presence of a well conceived and carefully planned program for informing the school staff and community. What passes for a program may be chiefly a collection of incidental and accidental activities lacking in direction and organization. If the principal's efforts are worthy of being referred to as a program, they will be part of a clearly conceived plan of action based upon definite principles. The program will avoid leaning heavily upon certain types of activity to the neglect of others which may be equally if not more significant. It will be characterized by continuous as opposed to periodic and spasmodic attempts to place the schools before the public.

What is needed are principals who can translate the principles on which politics are based into substantive programs of action. Making people feel at ease, opening lines of communications, and fostering security could be considered among them.

It is extremely vital that the principal be effective in the community. In working with parents and civic organizations the principal has a dual role to play. As a key person in the school's educational program, the principal has many face-to-face experiences with parents and civic leaders. When parents and community members raise questions regarding the instructional program, the principal should provide feedback to the community. The principal should establish such close working

relationships with the school-community that he is frequently called upon to help interpret the school's program to the community.

To many parents and community members, the evaluation of a school and its value to the community is in direct relationship to the success they have in communicating with the educational leader of the school. To many, the principal and the school are synonymous terms. Where the principal and parents have mutual and warm acceptance, there will usually be found parents who strongly support the school. Where mutual rejection, coldness, and formality exist between teachers and the children and their parents, parents tend to avoid the school, complain about it, and criticize education in general.

The superintendent should recognize the key role of the principal not only in guiding the educational program, but in obtaining and fostering sound support from the agencies and organizations in the community. In conferring with these agencies and organizations, the principal's responsibilities vary. Frequently, a principal is called upon to become a member of a community organization. In such instances, it is because of the esteem in which the principal is held. The principal will find many demands from parents and community groups for help in interpreting the direction of the school system. Handled expertly, these opportunities can prove beneficial to the superintendent in developing an informed and enthusiastic citizenry.

Because the principal is frequently called upon to interpret the school and community, his active membership in community organizations fosters close relationships between the two. Not only is the principal an active participant in the organization, but he is aware of the need

to help other educators with whom he works.

Participation in community welfare groups pays big dividends in helping the principal to become informed and able to inform others to work for, and help others work for, the best interests of the school's instructional program. As such he can influence others in working toward a more improved program.

In addition, it is the privilege and obligation of the principal as a citizen of the community to participate fully in the political activities of his choice. These are professional rather than personal experiences, however, in which the principal endeavors to maintain an active role. Not every principal will be an effective politician, but by the nature of his responsibilities, he must have a well designed plan for obtaining the support of the community.

Political Activities and the Public

The schools belong to the public; the public supports and maintains them. It follows, therefore, that the public is the authority to which educators are finally accountable for the manner in which they discharge the trust which the public has assigned to them.

It is the responsibility of the principal as an educational leader to (1) help educate the public to its true responsibilities, (2) to keep the public continuously informed of the school's activities -- their accomplishments, needs, and problems, and (3) to seek the support and assistance of the public in promoting educational improvement and in solving specific problems in which the cooperation of the public can be helpful. Cooperation between educational leadership and the public should be a two way affair.

In addition to providing financial support, a community can be helpful in many other ways. Conversely, the school under the leadership of the principal can contribute much to the community; the school can serve as a catalyst to bring together disparate cultural elements in the community and thus promote a better school system and community living.

The point is that a principal must regard his contacts with the public not merely as incidental to his other duties but as a special opportunity and responsibility to advance both the school and the community in which he works.

There are no special principles governing the political behavior of the principal and the public. In working with the public, the principal must remember that he is not working with an uninformed populace to which even elementary matters must be clearly "spelled out."

In their relations with the school, members of the community should be dealt with as equals; as intelligent citizens who are interested in sharing and who have a right to share in the problems of the school. The public is not always right in its views and frequently is in need of direction; this is where the principal can play a significant part.

There is always a temptation to show special courtesies to influential members of the community and, indeed, to take the greatest pains with those citizens who show a tendency to be obstructive. In their relations with individuals and community groups, principals should display scrupulous impartiality. This should be especially the case when differences develop in the community regarding school affairs. School people cannot and should not always remain neutral, but in the face of any divisions that arise, they must maintain integrity and a complete sense

of fairness. The principal's chief aim is to develop mutual understanding and respect between the school and its community.

An Operational Framework

Summerfield's[12] book, The Neighborhood-based Politics of Education, provides a way of conceptually viewing the factors and relationships associated with the political behavior of the principal. The works of Easton[13], Beer[14] and Baker[15] provide a systematic way of observing and describing the political activity of the principal.

The political activity of the principal can be viewed from the perspective of a bridge player with one major exception. Instead of fifty-two cards (variables) the principal has an unlimited number of variables with which to contend, thereby causing this seemingly static state to be in constant flux.

Figure 1 identifies a limited number of the agencies and organizations (variables) the principal must communicate with and influence.

It is the sheer number and interaction of these variables which keeps the principal "finessing" like the bridge player; only a failure in "finess" may not cost him the game, but his job. It's interesting to note that the community in which the school is located can stimulate movement in the school as well as throughout the school system. This stimulation can be seen by examining some of the factors which affect the school presented in Figure 2. The principal must be involved with the agencies, coalitions, and organizations which affect the life of the school.

Implicit here is the need for trust between the principal and

FIGURE 1

CHURCH
OUTSIDE WORLD
P.T.A.
COUNSELORS
NURSE
LEGION
PRINCIPAL
DEPT. HEADS
TEACHERS
STUDENTS
CUSTODIANS
COUNTRY CLUB
ROTARY

those in the various organizations, groups, and agencies (A, B, C, etc.). [The goals of these organizations and the larger school system may differ in many respects.] An example of this might be the concern for lower taxes by the senior citizens and the demand for increased taxes by youth organizations which see this as a way of improving quality education. The principal, therefore, must function as a regulatory center between the larger school system and the groups, agencies, and organizations affecting the school. This means that the principal will be attempting to foster communications by serving as a linking pin (this can be seen in Figure 2. The principal is communicating with agencies and organizations outside the school and linking them to one another and those in the school). To do this, what resources, structural and charismatic, are available to the principal? Since structural resources are allocated by central administration on a limited basis, the principal's primary resource is that of charisma, which he uses to glean additional resources from the larger system and the community in which the school is located. Granted charismatic leadership is not an end in itself, but it can be a means to the development of a supportive base (coalition) needed by the principal.

The danger associated with the development of influence is clear and, therefore, requires an understanding on the part of the principal and chief school officer. For there may be times when the principal cannot support a given issue because he is in the process of linking various elements in the community, and any overt action on his part would do more harm than good. Conversely, the principal's ability to influence his constituency in supporting a bond issue by which they will not benefit

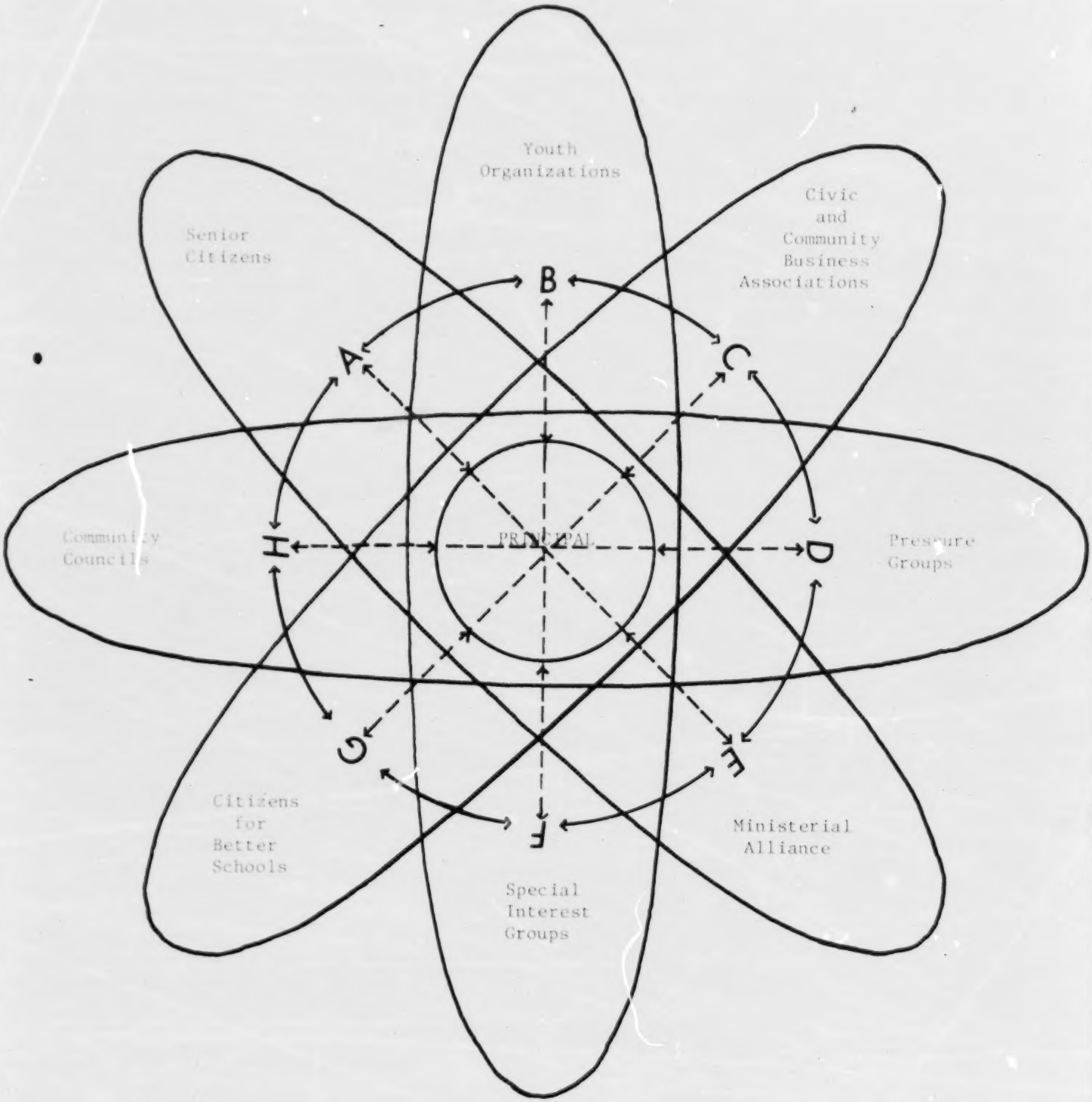

Figure 2

External Factors Affecting the School

directly is often a difficult but necessary task.

In conclusion,

> Whether we like it or not, virtually no one is completely beyond the reach of some kind of political system. A citizen encounters politics in the government of a country, town, school, church, . . . and a host of other organizations, from the United Nations to the P.T.A. Politics is one of the unavoidable facts of human existence. Everyone is involved in some fashion at some time in some kind of political system.[16]

Because of the relationship that has developed between education and politics, it is clear that political activity is one way to increase the school resources and thereby improve the instructional program. The following guidelines are suggestive and not meant to be inclusive.

The principal should:

1. "Know how to study and analyze the political systems in which the school functions."[17]

2. Understand the power of politics in a theoretical and operational context.

3. After studying and analyzing the political systems and climate in which the school functions, prepare strategy for accomplishing organizational goals.[18]

4. "Be psychologically ready to lose sometimes without sacrificing your position, lines of communication, and organization."[19]

5. Develop a philosophy which they can defend with respect to their political activity.[20]

Finally, if principals are to succeed as educational leaders, they must be able to circumvent the massive educational bureaucracies. This requires utilization of tactics and strategies which have been historically foreign to the education profession.

Principals are in an advantageous position to be one of the individuals in the school community that can influence the decisions and actions of others. First, the principal is given authority by the system because of his position. This position tends to increase his prestige and credibility of his opinions and beliefs. It also gives him the image of an expert (which he must earn) which he can use to attain public approval for educational programs.[21] Second, the principal is in a position of influence. He is exposed to various individuals and groups who are interested in education, and he could use his influence in persuading these factions. These individuals and groups, when they are united on an issue, can constitute a powerful alliance toward the outcome of a dispute.[22] The school principal, if he possesses certain qualities in his personality, his attitudes, and his abilities, can use his influence to fashion needed coalitions in order to achieve needed resources and the adoption of the values and programs which he believes can better the schools educational program.

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